

CHAPTER 9

APRIL 19, 2011

It was midday, lunchtime. Everyone had gathered up on the roof to have some lunch, though why the roof and not, say, the fucking cafeteria, was completely beyond Justin. Really, anywhere but the roof would have been acceptable for him, but no. Had to be the goddamn roof. He had gotten more than a few funny looks from his friends as he tried to force his way up the stairs to the rooftops.

"Hey, are you alright? You don't look so good..."

He didn't feel good. He could practically feel the blood rushing out of his body, his skin turning pale as he held on to the railing upwards for dear life, his legs wildly shaking as he forced himself closer and closer to the roof. He hated stairs, and not for the reasons one would think. Whereas most people hated stairs because they were lazy sacks of crap, Justin had a legitimate fear of them. The higher he went up on them, the weaker his knees got, the more difficult he found it to stand. Climacophobia, the doctors called it; fear of climbing stairs. Apparently it stemmed from a fall he had as a child, though this was entirely based on a testimony from his parents. He himself never recalled such a fall.

"Y-yeah, I'm f-fine."

He really wasn't. He could feel his legs sinking closer and closer to the ground, trying to get as much balance as possible as he climbed the staircase. And this was only the third flight. If the building had been any taller, he would have practically been on his knees by the time he made it to the rooftop. And even now, he found himself rushing away from the staircase the second he made it to the stable grounds of the roof. His vision was shaking slightly as he tried to regain his bearings, his breathing frantic and unstable. He immediately reached for a cigarette in his pocket. If there was any plus side to being up on the roof, it was that he was in no immediate danger of him being caught smoking. He lit it up and took a good long drag of the cigarette before exhaling the smoke. In retrospect, maybe it wasn't so much smoking that helped him calm down as it was the deep breathing he had to do when he was smoking. Either way, he took a few more puffs before extinguishing the smoke and carefully discarding of the evidence.

"You sure you okay?"

"Yeah... Yeah, I'm fine. I just really hate stairs."

Everyone gave each other a quick look of confusion. Surely Justin wasn't panicking just because he hated stairs?

The awkward atmosphere Justin's anxiety attack had caused was soon pushed out of the way as they all made their ways over to the far end of the roof, lunches in hand. Save for Justin who had opted out of bringing lunch for the day. If he had known everyone would be eating lunch together today, he probably would have reconsidered that decision.

"Hey, don't you have a lunch?"

"H-Huh? Oh, uh... I don't really eat much..."

It was only a half lie. He really didn't eat that much. He outright refused to eat breakfast in the morning because it just made him sick, and when he did eat lunch and dinner, he generally ate very little. Food just didn't really settle right in his stomach. Still, from the looks of it, Chie didn't believe him in the slightest.

"You sure? You can have some of mine if you want."

"Positive. Thanks for the offer, though."

"Well... alright."

It was hard to tell if Chie felt bad that Justin wasn't eating, or if she was still caught on what had happened to his eye the day before. It probably didn't help that he took the cane they gave him everywhere he went. But goddammit, it's a fucking cane. When someone gives you a cane, you fucking use it. Either way, Justin felt bad that he was more or less a living embodiment of grief for Chie. It seemed like all week he had been getting himself into some kind of trouble that just made things awkward for everyone involved.

Justin decided to take a look around at what everyone was eating, against his better decision. He was actually pretty hungry, but he wouldn't dare let any of the others know. He wasn't a charity case, after all. Chie had instant noodles, and Yosuke had steak bits. Justin couldn't even guess at what it was that Yu was eating, but goddammit, it looked delicious. Justin almost had to stop himself from drooling at the aroma coming from his food. It smelled like steak, but with a pepper spread on it, amongst other spices. He somehow doubted he made that all on his own.

"So, how'd everything go with Yukiko?"

For whatever reason, they had dropped Justin off at his house first last night. He wasn't sure if it was because his house was closer, or if it was a pity thing. Really, he wouldn't have minded walking with the rest of the group to drop Yukiko off, but they seemed to insist otherwise. Either way, he still didn't know how things worked out concerning her.

"Good. She's going to take a week or two off to recuperate, but otherwise she seems fine."

"Well that's good to hear. She remember anything yet?"

"No... We figured maybe she just needed some time."

"Makes sense to me."

It actually didn't, but he didn't think questioning Yukiko right now would make things better. The problem is she could barely remember what had happened when she was still in the television, right? So how would she remember anything a week or so later? The memory would get stale by that point. A week might be too long to ask her questions about this stuff...

"So... uh... how's your eye?"

Chie had practically forced the subject out. He knew she didn't want to talk about it, though she did want to make sure everything was okay.

"This again? I told you, it's all right. Quit worrying so much."

"I know, it's just... I feel responsible, you know?"

"Jeeze, Chie. It's not like I'm going to be blind forever."

"I guess..."

There was a brief pause in discussion between everyone, as if the mere mention of Justin's eye was enough to kill the mood. It killed him a bit on the inside to think that his very existence, the act of just being there, was making things awkward. It took a while before Yosuke tried to awkwardly push the discussion over to something more upbeat.

"...S-So... uh... any of you guys get that new Risetete album?"

"Risetete? Don't tell me you're into that stuff, Yosuke."

"Risetete? Who's that?"

Everyone started to give Justin a dirty look, as though he were an idiot to ask that question. Even Yu, was looking at him funny. How big was this Risetete person that everyone but him seemed to know who she is?

"Dude, you serious?"

"Yeah, I've never heard of her before..."

"Dude, she's all over the place! She's got like twelve albums out now and she's only been an idol for a couple of years...!"

Idol was the keyword here. Justin never really identified with those type of musicians. Not that he really kept up with modern music anyway. Other than The White Stripes and occasionally The Black Keys, the only music he really listened to was classic rock and punk. Still, you would think he'd have heard the name being thrown around if she was as famous as Yosuke made her out to be. Unless...

"You know, she's probably not very big over in California."

That was it. That was why he hadn't heard of her, he couldn't have. No one there would have heard of her, and it's not like Justin had been living in Inaba long enough to pick up on the trending artists.

"Well... that sort of explains it. But still, I'm surprised you haven't heard of her over here yet."

"Yosuke, it's been a week."

"She's very popular."

"Given the looks you guys gave me? I figured that much already."

Yosuke looked up into the sky for a brief moment before a smirk swept across his face. He grabbed his headphones and handed them to Justin. Justin immediately caught on to Yosuke's idea, and just as quickly was opposed to it. He didn't want to listen to any of that idol crap.

"Here, I have some Risetete on my iPod."

"I'll pass."

"Dude, just put the headphones on."

Justin swapped a glance with Chie quickly. They both looked slightly bewildered, but from the looks of it, both were in agreement that if he just listened to Yosuke's shitty music for a few seconds he would shut the fuck up about Risetete.

"Fine. Just don't blast it. My ear is still killing me from yesterday."

"Hey! You said it was fine!"

"It is. It's just a little sore is all."

"You better not be lying."

"Please, would I lie to you?"

"Yes."

"Definitely."

"No question."

"Yeah, fuck you guys too. Give me the damn headphones."

Justin practically swiped the headphones out of Yosuke's hands, wrapping them gently around his head, careful not to rub the burn on his ear the wrong way. Justin had been relieved that the burn wasn't so bad that he damaged his hearing, but god be damned if loud shit didn't make his ear ring like a bitch. Yosuke slowly went through his library of songs, his eyebrows scrunched as if he were having a hard time picking one. After what felt like a good whole minute, sound started to blare through the headphone set. *GODDAMMIT YOSUKE, I SAID **DON'T** BLAST IT.* Even with his left ear ringing like all hell, Justin could still sort of make out the sound coming through his right. And he completely regretted it. It was exactly the bubblegum pop crap he had expected to hear. He felt like a part of him had just died listening to this shit. Hell, he even took a moment to apologize to Zeppelin, and the Beatles, and all those other rock bands he loved inside his mind; apologize for the way music had fallen from its throne and that this is what they had left behind in their wake. Still, she had a nice voice. It was a shame she was wasting her talents on this kind of crap. Justin just shook his head after a couple moments of listening to it, pulling the headphones off in the process.

"Not my thing." He had put it VERY delicately.

"Oh come on man! You had your mind set on hating it before I even turned it on!"

It was true, he did. But even if he hadn't, he knew he would have hated it.

"Only a little."

"Oh, and what exactly do you listen to that's so much better!?"

"We're having a music war?"

"Yosuke, don't be such a crybaby."

Damn. Even Chie is getting into it.

"No, I want to know what he listens to that he thinks his taste in music is better!"

Justin reached into his pocket, pulling out his iPod. Rather than handing Yosuke the headphones, however, he just tossed the entire device Yosuke's way.

"Pick any song on there. Any one at all."

Yosuke put the headphones in his ear, as he shuffled rapidly through Justin's music library. Most likely so he could find a song that sounded like complete shit based on the title. It took a while, but he eventually tapped his thumb against the touch screen, focusing his eyes back up towards Justin. After a few seconds, his brow

scrunched up, his mouth open with disbelief. He looked back down towards the iPod and tapped at it again. And again. And again and again and again. After a while he outright tore the ear buds out of his ears and threw the iPod back Justin's way. He barely caught it before it went flying off the rooftop, much to Chie and Justin's displeasure.

"Alright, fine! You win!"

"Let it here forth be proclaimed that I, Justin J. Tylor of Inaba, have superior taste in music to that of Yosuke Hanamura, the Prince of Junes!"

Chie giggled slightly at the overly exaggerated formality of Justin's proclamation. Even Yu smirked a bit at Justin's over confidence in his victory. Yosuke just grumbled under his breath.

"What's the J stand for?"

"Huh? Oh, Jeremiah."

Yosuke burst out in a fit of laughter, much to the disapproval of everyone else.

"Your middle name is Jeremiah!? Pfft-"

"Oh I'm sorry, what was YOUR middle name again?"

Yosuke's laughter cut off nearly immediately.

"Yeah, that's what I thought."